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ABSTRACT

By responding to the specialized needs of their clientele, private institutions have provided a personalized, value-oriented education to a degree not possible in the public sector. Notwithstanding the accomplishments of private institutions, demographic studies of postsecondary education indicate declines in private enrollments, a trend that is destined to become increasingly pronounced in the immediate future. This document surveys options available to small colleges threatened by declining enrollments, inflated costs, and decreased tuition related income. Five representative colleges highlighted here typify the strategies in use to combat declining enrollments and increasing costs. Most of these institutions reported the employment of multiple approaches. A principal method used is an increased response to new markets: evening students, adults, disadvantaged, mature women, veterans, commuter students, business trainees, military personnel, and job training for nurses, technicians, and managers. Improving overall management by reevaluating budgets and programs or by upgrading the professional level of management within the institution are frequently used strategies. Private colleges should reexamine their institutional goals and charter to determine the strategies most compatible with their educational mission. (Author/KE)

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Private Colleges: Strategies for Change

In this article, Joyce Smith, assistant dean, Rockhurst College, and Harold L. Finch, vice president, Johnson County Community College, continue their survey of options available to small colleges threatened by declining enrollments. Their article in the December, 1974 *Planning*, "Demographic Planning: An Action Approach," focused on a method for community colleges to anticipate changing social patterns. Here, the authors suggest the range of alternatives available to private institutions able to adapt to new conditions.

The Commission believes there is a continued need for a strong private sector in American higher education. The presence of the private sector extends diversity, provides valuable competition for public institutions in developing quality, aids in protecting autonomy for all higher education, and fosters the type of institution that gives individual treatment to individual students.
—Carnegie Commission[1]

Private colleges have made significant and unique contributions to American education. Their emphasis on undergraduate studies has provided important resources for the education of scholars, scientists and other professionals. Private institutions, responding to the specialized needs of their clientele, have provided a personalized, value-oriented education to a degree not always possible in the public sector.

The Enrollment Slump

Notwithstanding these accomplishments, demographic studies of post-secondary education indicate declines in private enrollments—a trend that is destined to become increasingly pronounced in the immediate future. The closing of 50 independent colleges in the past three years presages the problems that lie ahead.[2]

Compounding the problem of declining enrollments is the financial squeeze created by inflated costs coupled with decreased tuition-related income. The same economic recession which forces colleges to hold the line on expenditure budgets creates a situation whereby parents who would ordinarily send their children to private colleges are increasingly unable to pay tuition. Thus, private colleges receive an even smaller percentage of the already shrinking pool of students than they would ordinarily recruit. Even prior to double digit inflation, the percentage of first-time college students attending private institutions was on the decline. Between the years 1966 and 1971, the private "share" of first-time students attending American colleges dropped from 29 percent to 21 percent.[3] Unless current patterns are significantly altered, the existence of many additional private colleges will be seriously threatened.

Need for New Approaches

Traditional approaches to combating decreasing enrollments—tightening the belt and recruiting harder—generally will not be adequate methods of dealing with the predicted declines. Frequently, economy measures prove to be counterproductive. Cutting programs and reducing recruitment efforts and advertising budgets can result in additional enrollment reductions. More aggressive student recruitment efforts can lead to a zero sum game: given a limited number of applicants, for every winner increasing enrollment there will be one or more losing colleges.

In view of these problems, the Education Committee of the Greater Kansas City Federal Executive Board recently commissioned a survey aimed at understanding current enrollment patterns and at attaining insights into ways to forestall, perhaps halt, or even reverse these trends. A major objective of the study was to identify and classify alternatives which could help small private colleges to remain, or to become, dynamic, thriving institutions at a time when many are struggling to survive.[4]

Successful Strategies

Five representative colleges highlighted here typify the strategies in use to combat declining enrollments and increasing costs. (*See box.*) Most of these institutions reported the employment of multiple approaches. A principal method was increasing response to new markets: evening students, adults, disadvantaged, mature women, veterans, commuter students, business trainees, military personnel, and job training for nurses,

COMBATTING THE ENROLLMENT SLUMP AT FIVE PRIVATE COLLEGES

Rio Grande College, Rio Grande, Ohio. Independent, four-year liberal arts, co-educational. Faced increased competition from public institutions, reduced enrollments, rising costs.

Approach: Contracted with Chio Board of Regents to operate a public community college program.

Results: Maintained private college identity and offerings. Provided an instant community college with minimum time and money in acquiring facilities and staff. Reduced tuition from $1710 to $710 for district students. Increased enrollment—in first year following change, freshman class was second largest in history.

Marymount Manhattan, New York City. Independent, four-year, liberal arts. Day division for women; evening co-educational. Faced competition from public institutions, rising costs, cramped facilities. Attrition rate 11% of full-time students.

Approach: Increased recruitment of part-time and transfer students. Strengthened fiscal management, added facilities, obtained federal funds for programs for disadvantaged, initiated strong counselling programs, emphasized faculty development.

Results: Eliminated deficit. Increased enrollment 40 percent since 1969 (part-time up from 35 to 974).

Spertus College of Judaica, Chicago. Independent, four-year liberal arts, co-educational. Problem: "how to find money and students to stay alive."

Approach: Marked specialized Judaic studies to 11 comprehensive colleges and universities.

Results: Increased enrollment from 276 in 1964 to 648 in 1973. Improved financial status. Provided cooperating colleges with high quality, specialized courses that they otherwise could not afford to offer. Eighty percent of Spertus College students are enrolled at one of the affiliated colleges.

Chatham College, Pittsburgh. Independent, four-year liberal arts college for women. Emphasis on pre-professional and career preparation. Faced with declining enrollments, rising costs, apparent preference for co-educational institutions.

Approach: Resisted the trend toward co-education. Emphasized non-traditional opportunities for women and the need for liberal education in career planning. Set up program for mature women returning to college.

Results: Received recognition as a center for women's education. Received five major grants from private foundations totaling more than $700,000.

Maryville College, St. Louis. Independent, four-year liberal arts, co-educational. Faced declining enrollments, budget deficit.

Approach: Reorganized. Added programs in career education. Conducted market surveys. Appointed advisory committees. Absorbed Mercy Junior College nursing program. Appointed lay staff and board members.

Results: Provided career options. Increased enrollment from 440 to 1021 in four years. Balanced budget—currently generating modest surplus.

technicians and managers. Some colleges created satellite campuses where markets already existed.

Improving overall management by reevaluating budgets and programs or by upgrading the professional level of management within the institution were frequently used strategies. Increased recruitment, greater effort to retain students who were enrolled, and achieving a clear definition of the college's image were other objectives. Additional emphasis was placed on the development of financial resources through fund raising, merging resources with other colleges, developing cooperative arrangements with other institutions and seeking foundation and government grants.

To combat the twin problems of increasing costs and decreasing enrollments, private colleges should reexamine their institutional goals and character to determine the strategies most compatible with their educational mission. Changing the institution to meet the changing demands of today's students does not mean that all institutions must become alike. These brief case studies illustrate how many private colleges may retain their distinctive identities and mission, and at the same time, reverse the enrollment downturn. For these colleges, the answer has been to identify their unique contributions and strengths, and to improve service to their clientele by specializing in these areas.

—Joyce Smith
Harold L. Finch

NOTES

[1] A Digest of Reports of the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974, p. 63.

[2] "After the Shutdown." Chronicle of Higher Education, August 5, 1974.

[3] Fall Enrollment in Higher Education 1971. Washington, D.C.: National Center for Educational Statistics, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1973.

[4] The authors surveyed 50 national educational agencies which nominated 100 institutions for possible study. The list of 55 colleges which responded to a questionnaire may be obtained from Dr. Joyce Smith, Assistant Dean, Rockhurst College, Kansas City, Missouri.

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